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Father's Waltz

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FATHER'S WALTZ

I sit alone in my front room, my best room, with my plants. I water them and they grow in the slanting sun. The patches of light cross my floor. They lengthen into the wall and fade when daylight turns to dusk in my front room as I wait for Peter. He will come today, I know. He and Mag are waiting for the baby to sleep.

My little great-grandson just two months old. He was crying like an orphan and I said, *Come, let me hold the baby. I can get him back to sleep.* I had to force her, that girl Mag. They brought him to me wrapped up so he couldn't kick me. I put him over my left shoulder and his screaming sounded in my right ear, and far away. *Such a nice boy, such a good boy. Be quiet for great-grandma.*

Maybe I better feed him. Mag came close but I held on. He was being so good. *Grandma, he'll quiet down after I feed him.* But I rocked harder. I could not feel my feet though I was kicking the floor, and she yelled, *Peter, Peter, Peter,* in my good ear and made the baby scream.

Let me quiet the baby.

He needs to be fed, grandma, then he'll quiet down.

Liar. She was lying to Peter. My grandson. I held onto my great-grandson. I held him as tight as I could. They would take him away from me. They would not let me see him. He was two months old. Two months. And they would take him away.

Then Peter's hands stopped the arms of my rocker. They are big hands, covered black with curls of hair. *No.* I kicked against the floor. *Please?*

Grandma, he needs to be fed.

Peter has crooked yellow teeth from smoking a pipe like his father and between his teeth are lines like black veins, and I let my great-grandson slip down my breast until Peter reached and grabbed him. The poor thing cracked his head on the arm of my rocker. The left arm. Not hard, but he screamed. His mouth was a big hole.

Be careful. Why can't you be careful?

Mag was hugging the baby harder than I ever would and I could hear him screaming so loud it filled the room more than the sunlight. She unbuttoned her blouse and flapped it down and I saw with my

own eyes why the boy is so small. Her breast is no bigger than an egg. The poor boy could hardly find it. The nipple was hard and dark brown and sticking straight out like a withered root. I couldn't help it when I started to laugh. Mag thought she was so important. She helped him find that little root and he shut up and she patted his head and let his nose drip on her bare skin. She was crying, too, so her chest pumped up and down. Peter stood next to her and she hid her face in his chest while he stroked her head just like she stroked the baby's. Across the room they looked so small, like dolls. I was quiet for them. For my grandson, for his wife, for my great-grandson. But they will not bring him again. Peter will come alone today.

Peter is James' baby. He has promised to help me now. *Do you need help, Grandma?* He was still faraway across the room and the sunlight was stronger than he was. It slanted across him and made his face like a white mask and it showed how his hands played in his lap. *Do you need help?* His mouth stayed open like he was hurt. The pain is all I feel. I feel it instead of my feet, or my knee, or my head, and next to me I keep my mirror and in it I can see each part of my body. With the mirror I blinded Peter so he could not see me. That was morning. In the afternoon he asked, *Do you need help?* He was just strong enough to ask a question he should be strong enough to know the answer to. Only Father spoke in statements. And proclamations. And declarations. His prideful, booming voice. *We're going to church. Come on, girls, we're going for a buggy ride. Go ahead. Go. You must marry him now. You made the choice yourself that night. I cannot make it for you. Leave me. It's too late to ask questions. Forget me. Forget your mother. Go.* And Father threw up his hands and pointed his big arm out and away. He was a blur in front of me. *Forget me, Peter. I have lived here, alone, all these years since your father left me. Forgot me.* To grow old with my plants. *I have my plants here. See how the sun warms them? See how they curl and float in the sunshine?* He sat across the room as the sunlight turned gold and then orange on his face until the clock in the window chimed six and he stood up. He still did not know what to do with his hairy hands. *Do you need help?* I sat in my rocking chair staring at him. He was a shadow as the sun went down. *Forget me, Peter.*

At dusk James came to me. *Leave me. But when you do, never come back. Have I loved you for nothing?* He held my two hands in his. They were cold. Outside, Fay sat on the porch swing and it creaked with her weight. A big woman, with mousy hair, fur to keep

James' hands warm. Her eyes were animal eyes, dark and secretive, and she made him just like her, so that his hands trembled over mine. He loved her now. As it should be, they say. *Have I loved you for nothing?*

For something, mother. For the something that makes me able to love Fay.

I have loved you for that? Fay swung from the swing leaving it to jangle and see-saw empty while she stooped over my flower beds.

Yes.

And I said what was true in my heart. *I hate her, James. I hate her. Leave me.*

He wrung my hands in his. He was pale, with hollow black eyes, and he was losing his hair. From studying, he said. Only his nose had color. It was red, like a sore on his face. *Mother. Mother. I don't want to go without your blessing. I'll be gone soon. To war, mother.*

To Fay, James.

And war as well.

Don't go. I held his hands. They were soft, and I put them on my cheeks just under my eyes where I couldn't see them. *Don't go. Have I loved you for nothing?* Day after day I fed and loved James. He was so good, always so good. And early he became a man, after Edward left and I said, *You're mama's man, now, aren't you, mama's boy?* And we laughed and giggled. Then I was crying. *Have I loved you for nothing?*

No, mama, you have given me everything. But now I must love Fay, too, and children when we have them.

Fay? Children?

Yes, mother. Fay. We are already married. Don't you see? We were married this afternoon.

I don't know how my heart beats, all scarred and lumpy and full of pain with only sunlight to keep it warm now. *Leave me.* But he held tighter. *Leave me!* And he fell on his knees and choked like when he was a boy after Edward left. Fay was still in the garden. I could see her head with those black eyes spying on us between the slats in the porch rail, so I touched his head. It was hot and moist. I rubbed back his thinning hair. For twenty-two years he lived with me. Twenty-two years. He cried against my knee. The drops fell hot, then warmed, then cooled as they ran down my leg. They froze my feet in a cold

pain. Then I felt nothing. He could go to Fay. He would. He could go to war. He would. A man thinks only of himself. *Have I loved you for nothing?* And he looked up at me one long, last time.

For everything.

He stood up and fumbled for his sport coat, the one I bought him for his graduation. He wore it for a jacket now. It still fit. No. It was a little big on him, like his father's coats he could never grow into. *Goodbye, mother.* And he hunched into his coat and left. The screen door slammed behind him and I saw Fay straighten her big body. He looked so weak beside her, so small she would crush him. I watched them to the car. The headlights flashed against me. I turned and on the wall my shadow was a huge, black stain that blurred and ran into the dry wallpaper. He was gone. My James. In dusk. Now I wait for Peter, James' son. My grandson.

He was such a dark and ugly baby. He looked like his mother, fat and round and hairy and he sucked on his hands, sometimes both his mouth was so large. There was always something missing, even as he grew. A tooth, or a button, or a sock. Always losing things, leaving them behind until I made James quit calling me to find them. *I am not his mother.*

But you are his grandmother. My grandson, a dark, ugly baby then a fleshless boy, with his black, bowl-cut hair and his mother's shiny black eyes. He had her ways, watching me from behind doors and trees and out of upstairs windows until every time I turned around I caught him staring. He spoke only for his mother. A pampered, spoiled child. I don't know how he could love Fay. She did not respect his father. She crushed James and at his funeral she thought her look was the final one. It wasn't. She went up crying to see him and the minister held her in her grief like I held James when he was sick over the toilet. She shook and sobbed for the whole church to hear and bent over so near his face her dress lifted up from behind and showed the tops of her stockings creasing her fat thighs. When I went to pay my respects I saw it. She had left a trickle of drool down his cheek. The cheek of my son, Edward's boy. But it was too late to cry, though my eyes misted and I bumped against the front pew. As my elbows bump against these rocker arms. As I wait and watch the sun. My eyes shrink, then grow bigger and bigger at dusk. I watch them grow in my mirror.

Like they grew when I rubbed my eyes with jimson weed so they would sparkle in the bright lights when I was seventeen, when

Edward appeared before me in uniform from the dark shadows behind the orchestra and asked me to dance. It was then I felt light, lighter than the frills on my beautiful white dress. How he could dance. He held me with such care in his strong touch. A tall man, over six feet, with a mustache as brown and bushy as Father's. I loved him before I remembered his name. The boy I'd known who went away to the University two years came back a man. Such a man. And now ready for war. So ready I feared for him more than I thought I should, but less than I should have. The war changed him and he returned with his own eyes fearful and his tenderness something he laughed at himself for. But not that night, when I was seventeen, when his tenderness, his strong hands, swept me round and around until I felt weightless and airy. He kept me as his partner all evening and squired me from the boys, the younger boys with their pomaded hair and eyes that watched Edward and me with awe as we struck a pose, a picture. As we twirled, my long dress arched up and softly, so softly, brushed the creases in his sharply pressed pants. I could feel my dress touching him. At the end of the ball, the lights went out and a single spotlight in the balcony followed the dancers through the dark commotion. And then it was brilliant, more brilliant than sunlight. So brilliant my eyes must have shone like his lips when the rest of the dancers went still and the light followed us around the ballroom and everyone made way for Edward and me and we spun and twirled and circled in a light all our own and cast our shadows dancing on our schoolmates, on the orchestra, on the gaily decorated walls. I was never the same after. Never. Such a man he was then, until the war.

And what is there for a man to do? When nothing suits me.

But you have to find something. There is James. There was James. My baby. Blond, curly headed boy, my only life after Edward left.

There is nothing for a man to do. Nothing.

Maybe Father.

Shut up! There is nothing for a man to do.

Until he found the job away. Clerking as he'd done summers making his way through the University. He had the little store in Lamar and he stayed there alone above it in no more than an attic. On weekends James had a father, but I never again had a husband. His pride was his distance from me and his drinking was his distance from himself. After two years away like that he tried to come home but it was too late. He was too far away. He was like the raccoon that

Father caged when Bess and I were small. We watched it lose weight, refuse food, gnash at itself finally and we made Father let it go. He wore his thick pruning gloves and lifted it to the ground. We shouted our joy, but the raccoon sniffed the air and the earth for two days and not until a thunderstorm scared us all awake did we find him gone. *There is nothing for a man to do.* But it was not Edward talking. His eyes were shadows where he hid from me.

There is James.

I must leave.

Where?

I don't know, but I must leave. You don't understand that. Perhaps you can't. I'll write.

You won't. You can't. If you go, never come back. Don't write. Don't lie to me, Edward. Never again. For a year you were in France and I never heard. I could not go out for fear of meeting people polite enough to ask after you. I became alone in this town. I became secretive and I hoped all the time you were gone that you were dead. Dead, Edward, so that your silence would mean something that I could tell people.

And now you are away in Lamar, and people think again that I have a secret I won't tell and they avoid me. And James. He has no one to play with. No father except on weekends. James hardly comes to know you and then you're away again. He feels your hands on him, a father's hands, but they are shadows that haunt him, Edward. You haunt us. Both of us. I hate you.

After I spoke, my own words horrible in my ears, he struck me. He struck my left ear entirely deaf. I could not hear him in the kitchen until I felt in my feet that something was crashing against the linoleum. I ran in and though it was dusk I saw him huge, his head almost touching the bare overhead bulb, surrounded by dishes broken and chipped and splintered, with pieces of bowl still wobbling at his feet. I followed him into the dining room, holding him by the belt, yanking at him. He dragged me to the maple hutch where I kept the china Father had relented and given me on my wedding day. Mama's china, supposed to be her first daughter's, and it was, though Bess did not think I deserved it, marrying young and so soon after I met Edward. And now Edward shook the hutch and rattled all the doors and drawers loose and grabbed at the precious dishes and platters and scooped through them like they were beans. He broke

them against the walls and the floor and I screamed and screamed. James ran from his room to help me pull at his father's belt, until Edward swatted me away. I fell and gashed my knee on a piece of plate and now I feel nothing in that knee. James pounded his fists against his father's thighs until Edward picked him up and held him, my son, head high. I screamed for fear that he would crash my boy to the floor, but he quieted then, and James went limp and Edward spoke in a whisper. *I must leave, James. Take care of your mother. Let her take care of you. It's what she wants. What she needs. Someday, you'll leave, son. Think of me then.* And I lay with my china, my knee bleeding, and the house, my beautiful house, was still.

I have loved him for nothing, Father. Father's strong, gentle hands bandaged my knee. Bess swept the china that should have been hers. *I hate him, Father. I have loved him for nothing.* Father patted my knee and picked me up in his strong arms and carried me like I was a little girl again. Like he did the day mama was sick and we went alone together to church while Bess stayed home to be mother's nurse. He clicked the horses just for me and they hurried down the elm lined lane and our faces were red and laughing, more full of merriment than the pair of cardinals peeking in and out of the forsythia next to the church. We played tic-tac-toe while the minister talked. And the horses were even faster on the way home, but we were going the wrong way. *Father, why aren't we going home?* He smiled, and the more I questioned him the wider his smile was and the faster the horses trotted until I was lost in my questions and his smile and the speed of the horses. I felt light. Then we were stopped just outside town where a band of wagons were covered with colorful curtains and little dark children ran around and hairy men and short women stood close to each other around a clear space of prairie. Father lifted me from the buggy and in that clear space he stood tall and spoke to the gypsies. They brought out bottles and balloons, and other people from town came. The clear space was full of people we knew, and a slim dark man came with a glass and a red scarf and he tied the scarf around my neck so it flowed down the front of my pink dress. In the glass were bubbles that floated to the top of the glass, and as soon as one popped there was another at the bottom. *Drink it.* Father was so gentle. *It's a soft drink. Drink it.* I drank it and the bubbles broke hot and tingling on my tongue and my throat burned but tickled, too. It felt so funny that I laughed and all the gypsies laughed and Father

laughed. I drank more and laughed again until I was finished and Father picked me up and danced round and around with me and carried me to the buggy where I leaned out and waved to the gypsies until we sped home.

Where mother was sick with Bess. *Walter, Walter*, she called from upstairs in her weak voice and I hid in the parlor. Father sighed walking up the stairs because he wanted to be with me. He said we could read. I would show him all the words I knew because I was better in school than Bess and the teachers liked me and Father knew it and he loved me. He loved to be with me and as soon as he was finished with mother's voice he came downstairs and sat next to me. He looked tired and he smelled like the leather buggy seat. I leaned into his lap but he stood up next to me. *You need to take a bath, young lady.*

Why?

Your mother says you're dirty. You were with the gypsies. And he winked at me.

I like the gypsies. I like the soft drink, Father.

He laughed deep in his throat. *Don't you tell your mother that. We're already a pair of renegades today. Come, Katherine, let's get you clean.* He ran my bath water and he came in my room and took off my dress and carried me naked to the tub. Father bathed me. He rubbed my body with soap until I was red all over and then he towelled me dry. His big hands were as red as I was. He rubbed me with them until Bess peeked at us and he carried me back to my bedroom and dressed me in my white dress and brought me a book in the parlor. I showed him all the words I knew and we were happy there until mother called him away. *Don't go. Don't leave me.*

Just for a while. Only a while.

And after Edward left Father came to me. I knew again how much he loved me, how much he had always loved me. I wanted him to come help be a father for James, but he would not. He bandaged my knee and carried me to my bed. *Now you will come live with us. Now that Edward's left.*

No. I will not be a burden.

And I choked and he looked down at me. *Burden? Father, you are all I have now.*

You have James.

My son, James, whose first thought must have been for Father, not

Edward, with Father there through his birth. *James loves you, too. You could be like a father to him.* Father smiled one last time and bent over and kissed my forehead, and that kiss burned more than the gash in my knee, and now my forehead is dead, even to sunlight. *Don't leave. Don't leave me. You are all I have now.* But he was gone, a black shadow disappearing across the door jamb. James rushed in to me and I held him so hard he cried out and I cried, too, but my left ear was ringing and I could hardly hear myself. I can look at each part of myself slowly, without moving. My forehead. My ear. My knee. My frozen feet. I can feel my pain without crying out. Father is gone.

Gone. Edward is gone. James is gone. Peter is my grandson. He is James' boy. He has a baby and I sit in my front room with my plants and watch them grow and wait for Peter, and for Mag. They will not bring the baby any more. He is a dark, hairy baby, uglier than Peter. They have named him Walter, for Father, and that is why I cannot love him. I cannot love any of them. Each of them is nothing to me, now. Though I wait for Peter in the lengthening stream of afternoon sun. Day after day I wait for him. He is all I have. He comes and he leaves and all the time he sits in my stiffest chair. His hands play with each other because they have nothing to do now that he will not bring my great-grandson. His hands are weak. Weaker than James.' And Edward's. Father's hands were strong. Huge, red strong hands. He is gone, and only my hands are strong. They must be strong. They grasp the ends of these rocker arms and pull and I rock up and down and up and down and I watch my shadow move in dimmer and dimmer fits against the wall.